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The Washington Monthly's Annual College Guide

By [The Editors](#)

A year ago, we decided we'd had enough of laying into *U.S. News & World Report* for shortcomings in its college guide. If we were so smart, maybe we should produce a college guide of our own. So we did. (We're that smart.) We've produced a second guide this year--our rankings for national universities and liberal arts colleges--and it's fair to ask: Is our guide better than that of *U.S. News*?

Well, it's certainly different. *U.S. News* aims to provide readers with a yardstick by which to judge the "best" schools, ranked according to academic excellence. Now, we happen to think *U.S. News* and similar guides do a lousy job of actually measuring academic excellence (see "[Is Our Students Learning?](#)"). But the aim of such guides is a perfectly worthy one. Higher education is a huge investment, and parents and students have a right to know whether their hard-earned tuition dollars will be well spent.

But isn't it just as important for taxpayers to know whether their money--in the form of billions of dollars in research grants and student aid--is being put to good use? After all, when colleges are doing what they should, they benefit all of us. They undertake vital research that drives our economy. They help Americans who are poor to become Americans who will prosper. And they shape the thoughts and ethics of the young Americans who will soon be leading the country. It's worth knowing, then, which individual colleges and universities fit the bill.

And so, to put *The Washington Monthly College Rankings* together, we started with a different assumption about what constitutes the "best" schools. We asked ourselves: What are reasonable indicators of how much a school is benefiting the country? We came up with three: how well it performs as an engine of social mobility (ideally helping the poor to get rich rather than the very rich to get very, very rich), how well it does in fostering scientific and humanistic research, and how well it promotes an ethic of service to country. We then devised a way to measure and quantify these criteria (See "[A Note on Methodology](#)"). Finally, we placed the schools into rankings. Rankings, we admit, are never perfect, but they're also indispensable.

By devising a set of criteria different from those of other college guides, we arrived at sharply different results. Top schools sank, and medium schools rose. For instance, Pennsylvania State University,

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University Park, 48th on the *U.S. News*

list, takes third place on our list, while Princeton, first on the *U.S. News* list, takes 43rd on ours. In short, Pennsylvania State, measured on our terms--by the yardstick of fostering research, national service and social mobility--does a lot more for the country than Princeton.

Don't get us wrong. We're not saying Princeton isn't a superb school. It employs many of the nation's finest minds, and its philosophy department is widely considered the best in the country. Its eating clubs, or whatever they're called, are surely unmatched. Princeton may be a great destination for your tuition dollars, all 31,450 of them, not including room or board. But what if it's a lousy destination for your tax dollars? Each year, Princeton receives millions of dollars in federal research grants. Does it deserve them? What has Princeton done for us lately? This is the only guide that tries to tell you. That, and a bit more.

The Findings

This year, once again, top-tier schools on the *U.S. News* chart fare much worse on our list. State schools are, by our measure, the primary heroes of higher education in the United States today. There are also a few villains to make it interesting. Here are some highlights from this year:

The U.S. News top 10 rarely cracks our top 10.

Of the top 10 national universities in the 2006 rankings of *U.S. News*, only two, Stanford and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, make it onto our top 10. Harvard, first with Princeton on the *U.S. News* list, occupies only 28th place on our list, mainly because it's weak on national service. MIT takes first place, while four state schools take spots two through five: the University of California, Berkeley; Pennsylvania State, University Park; University of California, Los Angeles; and Texas A&M University.

We love Texas A&M.

Sure, for some of us, Texas A&M evokes imagery of the weak being forced into a locker by the strong, but that doesn't change the numbers. At 60th place on the *U.S. News* rankings, Texas A&M may not be celebrated, but few other schools can compare when it comes to churning out great engineers and scientists in high numbers. It has a healthy level of ROTC enrollment, and it uses federal work-study money towards community service. Texas A&M thus breezes to fifth place on our list.

We love the ladies.

Three cheers for Bryn Mawr College, 21st on the *U.S. News* list but first on our list of liberal arts colleges, and the same to Wellesley, fourth on the *U.S. News* list but second on ours. On every front--social mobility, public service, and research--both schools perform near the top. Does their gender ratio, 100:0 women-to-men, have an influence? We don't know, but it doesn't look like an argument for admitting men.

Emory gets no love from us.

Emory, 20th on the list of *U.S. News*, comes in at 96th on our list. It ranks lowest on our list of any of the *U.S. News* top 25, and it's a full 42 spots behind runner-up Carnegie Mellon. Its social mobility score puts it at 104th place. (Its number of Pell recipients is low, its SAT scores are relatively high, yet its graduation is relatively low.) By spending its money on recruiting applicants with high SAT scores (a way of boosting

one's *U.S. News* ranking) Emory has apparently decided reaching out to poorer students is a low priority. Nor does it do especially well in public service or research. That's not great for a school with an endowment of \$4.5 billion, the eighth-highest in the nation. Boo, Emory.

The New School University: "unusual intent" meets non-existent results.

The New School University in New York doesn't engage in a lot of *U.S. News* jockeying, but it boasts of goals that are exactly of the sort this guide rewards. Its website speaks of the school's "unusual intent" to bring "actual, positive change to the world." The reality: it's at 228th place on our list. By every measure we have, it drops the ball. (By contrast, The Evergreen State College in Washington State, which approvingly quotes a description of itself as "ultra-progressive," scores much higher, at 47th place.) The best candidate for "actual, positive change" may in fact be the New School.

The Big Ten slaughters the SEC.

Of the 11 members of the Big Ten Conference--University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Purdue University, University of Wisconsin, Indiana University, University of Iowa, Ohio State University, University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Pennsylvania State University--all 11 make our top 75. Of the 12 members of the Southeastern Conference--we'll not list them all--only Vanderbilt University and the University of Florida even crack it. Football is fine for schools, as long as they're Midwestern.

UC schools continue to rule.

Sorry, red-staters. By our yardstick, University of California, Berkeley is about the best thing for America we can find. It's good by all of our measurements. The same goes for the rest of the schools in the UC system, four of which make our top 10, the rest of which make our top 80.

A new, better pressure

Let's go back for a moment to the issue of academic excellence. Academic measures are surely as important as those of research, service, or social mobility in allowing us to judge whether colleges are good for the country. We don't include such measures in our rankings, however, for a simple reason: It is currently impossible to get reliable data on how much learning goes on in America's college classrooms. Until we have good information, we'd rather stay silent than try to go down the path of *U.S. News* in devising oddball heuristics. (If it's a choice between wondering about your IQ and having it measured by someone who counts the bumps on your head, it's surely better to wonder about your IQ.)

It's not that such data on learning don't exist. But, thanks mainly to resistance by colleges and universities, especially the elite private ones, that information is under lock and key, unavailable for public inspection. What little we know about the data, however (again, see "[Is Our Students Learning?](#)"), suggests that if they were included in our ranking, you'd see similarly boat-rocking results. Many of the top schools on the *U.S. News* list would plummet, and many bottom-tier schools would soar. (No wonder the elite schools don't want the data out.)

We hope the rankings that follow will be useful in several ways. Adults can see how "patriotic" their alma maters are. Prospective students looking for colleges with a strong ethic of service, or with a reputation for fostering PhD candidates, or with records of

paying attention to poorer students, will find them here.

Most of all, we hope that citizens and elected officials will look at this guide when making decisions on how to subsidize and regulate higher education. After all, almost all the great challenges America now faces--the fact that incomes are not rising for most Americans, that the Army has resorted to recruiting ex-convicts and skinheads to fill its ranks, and that our economic competitors are increasingly investing in human capital to build the high-wage industries of the future--are ultimately tied to actions taken or not taken by America's colleges and universities.

The point is this: Rankings reflect priorities, and they also set them. Our periodic grouching about other college guides isn't so much about the influence they have on prospective students (although it's strong). It's about the influence they have on colleges themselves. In order to improve their rank in the *U.S. News guide*, schools often lose sight of the greater good and focus on throwing a lot of money at the wrong things in the hopes of gaming the system. (Emory's pursuit of high-SAT students over poor students is an example.) By enshrining one set of priorities, such as those set by *U.S. News*, colleges neglect the ones we think are most important.

This guide, then, is a modest bid to generate some pressure of our own, to create a ranking that will inspire schools to aim for standards other than those set out by *U.S. News* and its imitators. As we said last year, imagine if colleges--the many thousands of them--tried to boost their scores on *The Washington Monthly College Rankings*. They'd enroll more low-income students and try to make sure they graduated. They'd encourage their students to join the military or the Peace Corps. And they'd produce more scientists and engineers. In short, our country would grow more democratic, equitable, and prosperous. We don't think it will happen overnight, but we'd like to think our colleges will eventually sit up and pay attention.

And maybe they'd stop sending us so many damn brochures.

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